

# Telling the Planning Diversity Story

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*Over the past 25 years, the planning profession has become aware of a troubling lack of diversity in its membership, leadership, and professional development process. Efforts to increase racial, cultural, and economic diversity within the planning profession span a 25-year period, with a deeper commitment by the American Planning Association (APA) especially evident since the late 1990s. Written by one of the leaders in the diversity-in-planning movement, this article discusses these efforts and provides a series of recommendations made by the APA Diversity Taskforce in 2005 to increase diversity in the planning profession.*

Today, promoting diversity is an accepted part of planning practice. Having diverse participants in any planning process ensures the inclusion of different perspectives, produces a more inclusive outcome, and allows for a variety of viewpoints, talents, experiences, and skills to be brought to bear. Planners also consider diversity a public value that is socially and morally responsible. In light of this focus on diversity in the practice of planning, one would expect that the planning profession would be the poster child for diversity, but this has not been the case. Although the APA has always promoted social equity as a core value through its strategic plans and programs, the effort to increase minority participation in the planning profession has never gained traction or achieved concrete results. In fact, APA records indicate that as recently as 2004, approximately 2.9 % of its members identified themselves as Asian, 2.7 % Black or African-American, 2.2 % Hispanic, 0.4 % Native American, and 0.2 % multiracial. The numbers are even lower for minority members with professional planning credentials. This article reflects on the past 25 years of efforts by APA and its various state chapters to reverse these troubling statistics and to

promote diversity within the profession.

## First Steps

The APA began its social responsibility efforts in the late 1970s when it created the Women in Planning Division (1979) and the Planning and the Black Community Division (1980). After the founding of these two divisions, however, diversity efforts lost popularity in the APA, and we experienced a 14-year gap with little or no activity. Though social equity routinely found its way into APA's strategic plans, mainstream planning issues dominated the Association's attention instead for most of the 1980s and 1990s.

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### *About the author:*

*Mr. Silver started his tenure as Raleigh's fourth planning director in July 2005. He is an award-winning planner with over 20 years of experience. Mr. Silver is a national expert on urban planning and he specializes in comprehensive planning, public participation and implementation strategies. Mr. Silver has worked as Policy and Planning Director in Manhattan Borough President, a partner of a New York City consulting firm, a town manager in New Jersey and Deputy Planning Director in Washington, DC. Mr. Silver was just elected to the Board of Directors of the American Planning Association.*

By the mid-1990s, multiculturalism began emerging as a new social value, fueling a new interest in promoting diversity in the workplace. As issues associated with diversity increased, professionals soon realized that they possessed a unique perspective on their profession. The planning profession was no different. In the mid-1990s, the APA, through the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), rejuvenated its diversification efforts by publishing the Planning and Community Equity Book, adopting *An Agenda for America's Communities* in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots, and creating the Community Assistance Team to offer pro bono services to communities in need.

Despite the reemergence of this interest, professional segregation in the planning field was still commonplace. Black planners were assigned to plan in black communities and Latino planners in Latino communities. While planners often did not mind these assignments, they did express disappointment with their inability to advance and be recognized for their accomplishments. Far too often, management did not value or recognize the planning skills developed in disadvantaged neighborhoods as much as those developed through work in central business districts or emerging high profile neighborhoods.

### **New York City Gives Birth to Diversity in Planning**

In response to this troubling reality, I approached APA's New York Metro Chapter President, Linda Cox, in 1995 about creating a committee for minority design professionals. After a few months of discussion, the Chapter's Executive Committee fully endorsed the idea, and the Committee for African American and Latino Planners was formed. The committee was later renamed the Committee for Ethnic and Cultural Diversity, and the modern diversity movement in planning was born.

The initial group of planners, architects, and landscape architects quickly grew from ten to 30. The committee mentored students and young professionals, offered networking opportunities, offered positions on public

policy issues, provided training, and offered pro bono services. The committee's most significant achievement occurred in 1999, when it gathered over 30 minority design professionals for a community design workshop to assist the residents of Harlem in creating a vision for their waterfront. The end product, *Harlem on the River*, became a landmark effort in New York City planning and a turning point that helped transform Harlem's waterfront. That event still stands as the largest gathering of minority design professionals in New York City's history.



**Mitchell Silver, in his role as moderator for the first APA Minority Planning Summit. Washington, DC, 2004.**

Photo courtesy of Mitchell Silver.

### **After New York: Moving Forward**

Nationally, APA revved up its diversity efforts by developing a Spanish-language training manual on proper site planning; by working with Central American and Caribbean countries that were ravaged by Hurricanes Mitch and George in 1998; and by establishing the Judith McManus Price Scholarship for minority students and women. In 1999, APA also designated a seat on its Board of Directors for a minority member.

Building on this success, the committee issued a report in 2001 entitled "Lagging Behind: Ethnic Diversity in the Planning Profession in APA," which highlighted the under-representation of minorities in the field of planning, as well as the inequities and challenges facing those planners of color. Every APA leader received a copy. The study was the first of its kind and caught APA's attention.

In 2000, I was elected to the APA Board of Directors and served on the Membership Committee. By 2002, I was appointed chair. During that time I worked with staff to address the organization's social equity goals and low minority membership issues. My committee was asked to develop a Growth Strategy for APA, with the goal of increasing membership by 15,000 over ten years. As a response to the "Lagging Behind" report from 2001, we targeted minorities as key groups for membership growth.

The Growth Strategy, which contained nine strategies for increasing minority membership, was adopted in 2004. Instead of using the traditional survey method to understand member needs, one of the strategies called for a Minority Summit where we could hold a conversation with minority members and non-members—an approach that had never been tried before. This proposed summit sought answers to a few key questions: why were minorities neither joining nor retaining their memberships in APA? What type of opportunities, programs, and services should APA establish to attract mi-

## **2005 Diversity Task Force Recommendations**

### *Outreach*

- Create an Ambassador's Program to recruit minority members.
- Reach out to and establish partnerships with non-profit organizations where many minority planners are employed.
- Promote APA and planning through magazines and publications that target minority markets.
- Create a "Diversity and Planning" link and section on APA's website.

### *Education*

- Develop packages for high school and college career counselors and encourage National APA and chapter involvement at high school and college career fairs.
- Increase the dollar amount and number of scholarships APA offers to minorities. APA should also expand the promotion of these scholarships at career fairs and other venues.
- Increase outreach to planning schools with a high concentration of minority students.

### *Inclusiveness/Accountability*

- Ensure there are adequate staff resources to implement the minority growth strategies and to work on minority and diversity programs and issues.
- Ensure APA's bi-annual budget clearly illustrates how minority and diversity programs are funded.

### *Recognition*

- Create an APA National Diversity Award category, similar to the "National Women in Planning Award" to recognize individuals or organizations that promote diversity.

### *Planning Topics*

- Conduct research and feature articles in the APA Planning Magazine that deal with issues such as environmental justice, gentrification/displacement, and faith-based and community development initiatives.
- Complete the social equity reader, which would consist of articles that have appeared in APA publications over the past few years.

minority planners? What types of planning issues should APA address to attract minority professionals? What programs, products, or services should APA offer?

### The Washington Minority Summit

On April 28, 2004, over 100 people from around the country attended the APA's first Minority Summit in Washington, DC. The summit offered insightful information, raised excellent ideas, and energized its participants. The issues that surfaced during the summit were extremely helpful in shaping APA's next steps. Participants expressed concern about lack of outreach to the minority community; the lack of training and educational opportunities geared toward minorities; the negative perception of planning in general and APA in particular; the cost and value of membership; the quality of service; and the lack of diversity and social equity within APA. The participants also questioned the relevancy of planning as a profession; the lack of opportunity for career advancement and recognition within the profession; the lack of conferences and special events targeted to people of color; and the need to cover topics such as environmental justice, gentrification, and displacement in APA publications. The participants gave the summit high marks and requested a follow-up summit at APA's next annual conference in San Francisco to measure the Association's progress.

Following the Washington, DC summit, APA President, Mary Kay Peck, created a Diversity Task Force to de-

velop concrete ways to attract, retain, and better serve minority members of APA. I was appointed co-chair of the Task Force, and our charge was to create a report on these topics, to be reviewed by APA in San Francisco, in March 2005. We completed our recommendations (see sidebar), and they were adopted by APA at its annual conference in San Francisco that year. While the 2005 participants strongly supported these recommendations, they were displeased with the lack of action by APA in the year since the Washington summit. Members did not want another plan; they wanted results. In

response, APA President Dave Siegel promised action. He re-appointed the Diversity Task Force and charged it with prioritizing and implementing its recommendations.

### Chapters Respond

The 2004 Minority Summit was both historic and valuable. It served as a catalyst and motivated summit participants to initiate diversity programs in their individual chapters. While the Diversity Task Force prepared for the Diversity Summit in San Francisco, several chap-

ters began to step up and take action:

- **California:** In 2004, the California Chapter developed membership brochures to attract people of color to the profession. In 2005, the Chapter created a Membership Inclusion Program which mandated that each of California's eight sections have a director to focus on minority recruitment. The Chapter also provided grants and funds to advance diversity and recruit minorities.



**Attendees of the Virginia Chapter's "Diversity Breakfast" in Hampton, VA, in 2005.**

*Photo courtesy of Mitchell Silver.*

- **Virginia:** The Virginia Chapter started its diversity program in 2005. The committee is extremely active and routinely holds networking breakfasts and other events. In 2006, the chapter held its own diversity summit to illustrate the value of diversity and also developed brochures on diversity and the planning profession.

- **New York:** In 2005, the New York Metro Chapter's Diversity Committee celebrated its tenth anniversary. The committee continues to provide useful programs to its members and to communities of color.

- **North Carolina:** In 2005, the North Carolina Chapter created its Diversity Committee, which is now planning a program to reach out to historically black colleges and universities. In the same year, the Committee co-sponsored a workshop on gentrification in Raleigh to better understand the issues associated with urban redevelopment.

- **Chapter President's Council:** The Council, a group of leaders representing all 48 APA chapters, adopted a resolution in 2006 that listed diversity as one of its top priorities.

## Conclusions

The future looks optimistic for diversity, at both the national and local chapter levels. APA members are gathering signatures to create a division for Latino planners. APA created a Diversity Listserv, and launched a webpage to house diversity and social equity resources. Planning Magazine continues to feature articles on communities of color. Chapters are reaching out to students, young professionals, and communities of color. AICP Commissioners continue to address the AICP Exam minority pass/fail rate. As of this writing, minority membership in APA has increased slightly, but still remains low. Fortunately, APA is aware of the problem and is working to address it through several steps: (1) seeking more diversity in leadership positions and on committees; (2) creating a Social Relevance Task Force

to address the needs of underserved populations and people of color; (3) pursuing the possibility of writing a book to document the contributions made by planners of color.

As I look back at the first diversity committee meeting in New York City 11 years ago, I can definitely say things have changed. The journey should not have been this hard, especially for a planning profession that prides itself on inclusiveness and community involvement. Fortunately, I can look back over the past 11 years since New York and point to concrete steps we have made to increase diversity in the planning profession. My hope is that it will not take another 11 years to see more diversity in the profession.